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Viewing cable 07VIENTIANE525, LAO GOVERNMENT CAUTIOUSLY WELCOMES U.S. ARRESTS

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Understanding cables

Every cable message consists of three parts:

- The top box shows each cables unique reference number, when and by whom it originally was sent, and what its initial classification was.
- The middle box contains the header information that is associated with the cable. It includes information about the receiver(s) as well as a general subject.
- The bottom box presents the body of the cable. The opening can contain a more specific subject, references to other cables ([browse by origin](#) to find them) or additional comment. This is followed by the main contents of the cable: a summary, a collection of specific topics and a comment section.

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Discussing cables

If you find meaningful or important information in a cable, please link directly to its unique reference number. Linking to a specific paragraph in the body of a cable is also possible by copying the appropriate link (to be found at the paragraph symbol). Please mark messages for social networking services like Twitter with the hash tags **#cablegate** and a hash containing the reference ID e.g. **#07VIENTIANE525**.

Reference ID	Created	Released	Classification	Origin
07VIENTIANE525	2007-06-25 09:23	2011-08-30 01:44	CONFIDENTIAL	Embassy Vientiane

Appears in these articles:

<http://www.mcclatchydc.com/2011/04/22/112679/wikileaks-cables-bare-secrets.html>

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RR RUEHCHI RUEHDT RUEHHM RUEHNH
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RUEHCHI/AMCONSUL CHIANG MAI 0574
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 VIENTIANE 000525

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/22/2017
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MARR, RP, KFLU, SMIG, KCRM
SUBJECT: LAO GOVERNMENT CAUTIOUSLY WELCOMES U.S. ARRESTS

REF: VIENTIANE 479

VIENTIANE 00000525 001.2 OF 003

11. (C) Summary: Lao government officials appear to have been pleased and surprised by the June 4 arrests of Hmong-American General Vang Pao and others on suspicion of plotting violent action aimed at overthrowing the Lao government. However, the Philippines Ambassador, who talked to Lao government ministers about the arrests, told us that the senior leadership is monitoring the situation cautiously, suspicious that there may have been U.S. government involvement with the coup group. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs has requested that we keep it informed of developments, particularly any information on possible threats to Laos's national security. We have received unusually friendly overtures from the Lao government on several issues since the arrest, which may mean that Lao officials who favor closer cooperation with us feel that this is a good time to push their initiatives forward. End summary.

Public Response: From &Great News8 to Wait and See

12. (C) The first public reaction to the arrests by the Lao government came from Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesman Yong Chanthalangsy, who told Reuters in Bangkok on June 4, &This is the great news that Laos has waited for for so long. We hope the United States will prosecute them strictly under the Patriot Act and punish the violators of the law severely.8 (Comment: Actually, the suspects were charged with violating the Neutrality Act and other laws. End comment.) He made similar comments to the Thai newspaper &The Nation.8 In subsequent interviews, Mr. Yong, who may have received instructions to tone down his enthusiasm, was more guarded. Voice of America quoted him on June 6 as saying that Laos will monitor the Vang Pao case closely and that it will not affect Laos-U.S. relations in any way. The U.S. and Laos, he said, already enjoy good relations and cooperation between the two countries has steadily expanded in many areas. He said that it was too early to draw conclusions about the case. Coverage in the Lao press, meanwhile, has been limited to a few strictly factual stories, mostly picked up from the U.S. press (Reftel).

Discussions with MFA

13. (C) The Charge and Acting DCM met with Europe and Americas Director General Southam Sakonhninhom on June 6 at Southam,s request. The A/DCM had alerted MFA officials to the arrests by faxing the DOJ press release the day before. Southam requested official confirmation from the Embassy that General Vang Pao and others had been arrested in a plot to overthrow the Lao government. The Charge confirmed the arrests. She emphasized that Vang Pao and the others are innocent until proven guilty. She said that the Embassy had no information about the arrests other than what had appeared in the DOJ press release and the criminal complaint, which the Embassy provided to MFA. The Charge and A/DCM provided Southam with a copy of the Embassy,s warden message, issued that day, noting that the arrests had taken place. Southam did not provide an official reaction, but he seemed pleasantly surprised that U.S. law enforcement officials had taken action against Vang Pao. In a June 12 conversation, Southam told the Charge and A/DCM that the Lao government planned to issue a statement on the arrests soon. (No such statement has been issued to date.) In both the June 6 and June 12 meetings, Southam requested that the Embassy keep him informed about developments in the case. He expressed particular interest in receiving any information that emerges about potential threats to the national security of Laos.

Philippines Ambassador: Officials Watching Cautiously

¶4. (C) At a Russian national day reception on June 14, Philippines Ambassador Elizabeth Buensuceso told the Charge that she had discussed the arrests with Lao government ministers during the previous week's visit to the Philippines by a delegation led by Prime Minister Bouasone Bouphavanh. She said that the GOL officials are pleased that the arrests took place but are observing developments with great caution. In particular, they are wondering why a U.S. government person was involved (presumably meaning the retired military officer arrested along with the Hmong-Americans) and waiting to see what information comes out on U.S. government involvement. She said that it is because of this uncertainty that the Lao press is downplaying the arrests. Ambassador Buensuceso suggested that, given this high level of suspicion, any message that the USG could send to the GOL would be useful, even something as seemingly obvious as saying that we view allegations of a plot to overthrow the Lao government with great concern.

Chinese Diplomat's Comments

¶5. (C) Chinese Embassy Second Secretary Zhao Cheng Gang, who is about to conclude his second tour in Laos, told Poloff on June 13 that he believes the Lao government's attitude toward the U.S. government, which he described as hostile in late 2005 and early 2006, has improved during the past year. He said that the arrest of Vang Pao was well-received by his contacts in the Lao government and appears to be an opportunity to continue the improvement in relations.

Other Views

¶6. (C) An ethnic Hmong Embassy employee who is from XXXXXXXXXXXX, one of the most affluent and well-integrated Hmong communities, said that roughly half of the community was pleased and half of the community was saddened by news of the arrests. Customers at a shop owned by the Lao wife of an American local-hire employee commented after the arrests that they were pleased and surprised that the U.S. government would take this action to help the Lao government. A young man who approached the A/DCM on the way out of a social function and identified himself only as a senior member of the Lao communist party youth league spoke favorably about the arrests and enthusiastically discussed possibilities for youth exchanges between Laos and the U.S. Other Mission employees have heard similar reactions from Lao contacts. Vientiane-based Western expatriates have followed the news of the arrests with great interest. A number of them have speculated to us that the arrests were a positive gesture toward the Lao government by the U.S. (Note: Embassy personnel have been provided guidance on appropriate response to questions they may receive about the arrest cases and U.S. policy.)

Doors Opening All Over

¶7. (C) Since the arrests, we have made a surprising amount of progress in areas of our relationship with the Lao government where we had previously experienced difficulty. These include:

-- Officials at the Lao National Commission for Drug Control and Supervision (LCDC) provided nine drug samples to Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) personnel during a June 18 meeting. Despite multiple requests by DEA, LCDC had not provided any samples since 2005.

-- MFA officials called us on June 18 and urgently requested that we send a diplomatic note requesting a Subject Matter Expert Exchange (SMEE) on avian influenza to

be organized by PACOM officials as part of a series of increased military-to-military activities. PACOM personnel had raised this in two recent visits. This moves us closer to official Lao acceptance.

-- MFA DG Southam reacted surprisingly positively to the Department's June 12 press statement expressing concern about the deportation of 160 people from Thailand to Laos, despite the fact that it noted human rights problems in Laos and the refusal of Lao officials to allow international monitoring of returnees. Southam, who has in the past firmly resisted suggestions regarding international monitoring of people who have surrendered or been repatriated from Thailand, agreed that allowing international monitoring of the returnees would be a good idea. (However, MFA Spokesman Yong, who has more influence in this area, remains firmly opposed to international monitoring.)

-- In a discussion with the Charge about the next U.S.-Lao bilateral dialogue (following the first such meeting in October 2006), Southam said he hoped the dialogue would take place as soon as possible following the new U.S. Ambassador's arrival. On his own initiative, he mentioned military-to-military relations and Hmong issues (the latter of which the Lao delegation only reluctantly allowed onto the agenda last year) as possible areas of discussion.

-- Ministry of National Defense Chief of Staff Colonel Sisophon unexpectedly proposed an exchange of defense attaches in 2008 during meetings in Washington while on a Distinguished Visitor Orientation Tour. The Defense Ministry had in the past consistently stated that it lacked the resources to take this step.

-- Lao officials allowed our consular officers to visit two American prisoners on June 15. We had previously experienced difficulty in gaining access to U.S. prisoners.

-- In mid-June, purported bureaucratic obstacles that would have prevented in-country travel by a visiting lecturer on human trafficking sponsored by the Public Diplomacy Section suddenly disappeared.

Comment

18. (C) While we were initially hesitant to assume that the positive overtures we were receiving were related to the arrests, the change in attitude has been so sudden and pronounced that we can see no other explanation. We doubt, however, that there has been a high-level decision to improve ties with the United States. The Philippines Ambassador's assessment that senior Lao officials are avoiding a rush to judgment is likely correct. Many senior Lao officials, particularly those most closely tied to the military, have longstanding suspicions of the United States. Some probably believe that the U.S. has over the years at worst supported, or at best turned a blind eye to, assistance to insurgency groups by Hmong-Americans within the U.S. With a poor understanding of the U.S. system, these officials may be reading too much into the fact that a former U.S. military officer was arrested along with the Hmong-Americans. Defense attorneys for the suspects suggested during the bail hearings that they had reasonably believed that the CIA was involved in the plot. Lao suspicions may still be running in that direction, as implausible as this would appear to most observers in light of the arrests.

19. (C) What we suspect is happening is that those mid-level officials within the Lao government who favor closer cooperation with the U.S. see this as a good time to press ahead with initiatives that they previously saw as non-starters. It may be that some of these initiatives will ultimately encounter bureaucratic resistance once they reach higher levels, just as Mr. Yong may have been instructed to tone down his initial enthusiastic response

to the arrests. Still, the positive climate is a welcome change given the usual bureaucratic obstructionism and veiled hostility directed at the U.S. Excitement about the arrests here is likely to wane as the lengthy court proceedings, which will be poorly understood by even the most informed observers here, drag on. The more forthcoming that we can be with the GOL as the court case proceeds, the longer this positive climate is likely to last.

MCGEEHAN